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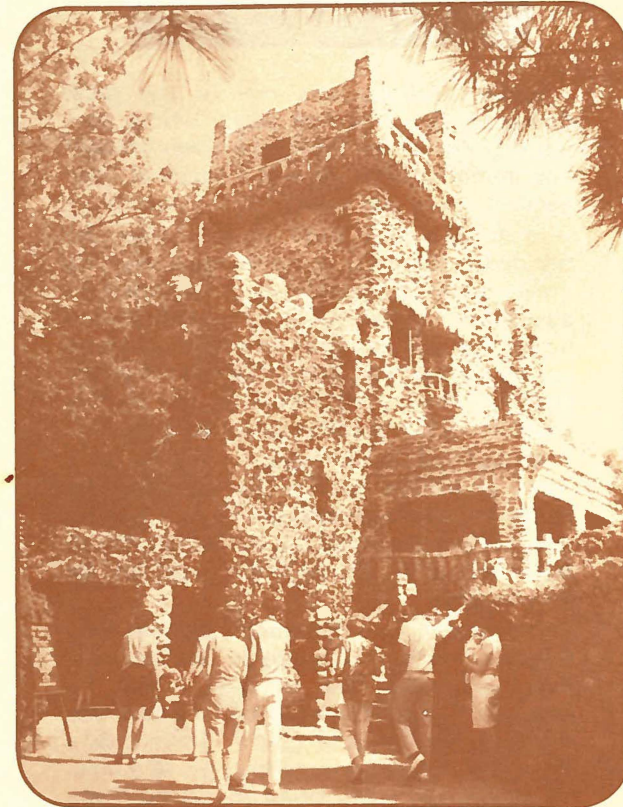
# GILLETTE CASTLE STATE PARK

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William Gillette was one of the great figures of the American stage, whose portrayal of the role of Sherlock Holmes brought him immortal fame. He was a native of Connecticut, born and educated in Hartford.

In 1913, at the peak of his career, he decided to build the home that had been his dream for years. He had all but decided on a location near Greenport, Long Island, when he headed his houseboat on a leisurely cruise up the Connecticut River. The beauty of the river and the striking terrain of the country about Essex completely captivated him.

At nightfall, he anchored in the lee of a rocky projection on the east bank not far above the Chester-Hadlyme ferry. It was his intent to remain overnight, but he became so fascinated with the area he remained for several days.

The picturesque tree-lined hills and lofty ridges of rock that bordered the majestic river impressed him so deeply that he acquired title to 122 acres of land between the ferry landing and Ship's Stern, with a shore front of about three-quarters of a mile. He abandoned plans for a Long Island home and transported a vast amount of iron and steel he had already purchased to Hadlyme.

He selected as the site for his home an area atop the loftiest peak, which happened to be the southernmost hill in a series along the river known as the Seven Sisters, and because of this he named his property

Seventh Sister. It afforded a commanding sweep of the river and country for miles around. Near the ferry, he constructed a tramway that carried workmen and materials from the road below to the work site on top. Gillette, who made his home here for many years, started construction on the building in 1914. With southern white oak and native stone, it took the contractors five years to fashion the Castle from Gillette's own architectural plans at a cost of well over a million dollars.

Of William Gillette, it has been written that he "combined breathtaking artistry on the stage with uncanny inventive ability, a precocious and daring initiative and a total disregard for accepted standards and ways." Between the date of occupancy in 1919 and the day of his death in 1937, this amazing genius had a field day in developing and furnishing his unique home.

He designed everything within and without his castle—and he designed everything to suit his own purposes. The castle has granite walls three to four feet in thickness at the base, tapering to about two feet at the tower, with heavy steel beams. Every bit of interior trim is hand-hewn from oak fashioned to minute specifications. Stout oaken doors are fastened by wooden locks of Rube Goldberg intricacies. Standard bedroom furniture is built into the structural frame of the castle and some of the other furniture slides on metal tracks. Electric light fixtures are festooned with bits of colored glass from bottles that Mr. Gillette gathered from his friends. The walls are hung with Javanese raffia mats made to his order. He could observe who was entering by glancing from his bedroom door on the gallery into the mirrors over the French doors in the living room. Twenty-four rooms are scattered about in a bewildering lack of uniformity and conformity, but all reflect the agile brain of William Gillette.

Outside, he gave full vent to his favorite hobby, trains and locomotives, no indoor miniature set for him. He constructed his own man-sized railroad that started from "Grand Central," a depot near the front entrance of the castle and wound its tortuous

way through primeval forest and rocky glen to "125th Street," to the east end of the property known as the East Loop and returned to "125th Street," then to what was called the Big Oak but is now known on the park maps as the Castle Oak, and is located near the present entrance to the park. The return trip was made from the Oak along the top of the western ridge which joins the Sixth and Seventh Sisters together and then back to Grand Central, a route of a trifle over three miles. It was his great delight to entertain his house guests by taking them on a train ride over his own railroad while he manned the throttle.

Although the railroad has been dismantled, portions of the old trestle and roadbed are still in evidence north of the entrance road picnic area.

Gillette's love for cats is in evidence at the castle, in the forms of doorstops, mantle decorations, images and ceramics. When he was alive it is said that he kept more than fifteen cats at the castle and varieties of goldfish, and two pet frogs in the conservatory.

William Gillette was perturbed about the future of his home, and in his will he specifically instructed the executors of his estate that, after his death, it was their charge "to see to it that the property did not fall into the hands of some blithering saphead who has no conception of where he is or with what surrounded."

The executors were faithful to Mr. Gillette's wishes for in 1943 Gillette Castle State Park was acquired by the State Park and Forest Commission. Today well over 100,000 people visit the castle annually, at the same time utilizing its extensive grounds for hiking, picnicking and to view the breathtaking colors of the autumnal foliage.

William Gillette was married in 1882 to Helen Nickles of Detroit and widowed six years later, never to marry again. His mother was a direct descendant of Thomas Hooker, one of the founders of the City of Hartford. Both Gillette and his wife are buried in the Hooker plot in a wooded cemetery in Farmington, Connecticut.